



September, Back to School Daze

Judith Harris (August 21, 2014)



Looking ahead to September, Oscar winner Gabriele Salvatores had compiled a film from 44,000 volunteers which will debut at the Venice Cinema Biennale on Sept. 2, giving a portrait of Italy and Italians taken, as if a snapshot, on Oct. 26, 2013.

ROME - Okay, many of us won't be heading back to school in September, but the approaching end of summer nevertheless rouses complex emotions. There is melancholy - those lazy, hot days so are over - but also the awareness that, as the first yellowing leaves proclaim the opening of a new chapter in our lives, novelty is in the winds. The novelties here begin with the presentation Sept. 2 at the 71st Cinema Biennale of Venice of Gabriele Salvatores' film "Italy in a Day" (Un giorno da

Italiani), billed as “Italy’s first do-it-yourself film.”

And so it is: cinema-selfies, compiled into a documentary after Oscar-winning director Salvatores invited anyone who cared to make his or her own video to do so, all on the same day for twenty-four hours on Oct. 26, 2013, and send it to him for compilation. Over 44,000 Italians responded, sending him 2,200 hours of images plus 632 edited videos, which were reviewed by a team of forty editors. “This is the first Italian experiment in collective movie-making,” he said. Producer is RAI Cinema together with Ridley Scott; back in the year 2000 Salvatores had done something similar for RAI on the boutique level. “The idea was to tell, through your look or your voice, what you consider important or what sparks your emotions,” he explains. “On the 26th people were just to film with phone or telecamera whatever they care deeply about.” You too can enter into Italian cinema history, he promised.

Also making history in its own way: at ancient Pompeii thirty new custodians were just hired. Until now no new custodians were hired when one retired, and their numbers inevitably fell by almost half in the past decade, even though custodians there must do night and weekend duty; unlike public museums, the site has no weekly day when it is shut. They also work year round, no matter how inclement the weather.

Custodial care at Pompeii is almost uniquely important. Besides the occasional hacking out of pieces of fresco painting, there are other problems. On the off-chance anyone missed it, three giddily misbehaving youths were arrested one night this August for breaking into and entering the Suburban Baths, which are located just below the Marine Gate (these are public baths with dirty pictures over the lockers). The three seem to have taken the dirty pictures all too literally.

Other good news, showing that the new EU and Italian funding for Pompeii is producing results, is that ten heretofore closed Pompeian houses opened this August to visitors after restoration. They are the House of Marcus Lucretius, House of Cornelia, the Thermopolium of Vetutius Placidus (take-out food stall, that is), the House of the Ceii, the House of the Lararius of Achille, the very important House of Frontone, the House of the Ara Massima (Great Altar), the House of Apollo, the House of the Ancient Hunt (Caccia Antica) and, yes, those same Suburban Baths which were invaded by the three wayward youths.

Even the sometimes waspy Salvatore Settis, the archeologist who is one of Italy’s most venerable public intellectuals, is waxing enthusiastic about the progress being made in reversing the decline of Pompeii. For 20 years, he writes, wrong-headed reforms, incompetent commissioners, do-nothing administrators, lack of personnel and the Camorra combined to degrade the site but finally, thanks to the EU’s donation of E105 million (which includes a hefty grant from Italy itself), “has produced a real leap forward.” Of 39 projects, the ten above were completed, and in coming months another 17 will go forward. “In short, something is moving,” he exulted in L’Espresso magazine July 14, “and in the right direction.”

But the autumn will also be enlivened by an interesting quarrel involving antiquities, in this case the world-famous Bronzes of Riace – two magnificent warriors, one youthful, the other more mature, cast of bronze in the 5th century BC who were fished out of the sea near Riace in Reggio Calabria in 1972. They are splendid statues, now on view in the National Museum of Magna Grecia at Reggio. (For details, see [>>>](#) [2] They have been in the headlines over Ferragosto because intellectual



gadfly Vittorio Sgarbi proposed they be brought to Milan as star turns at Expo 2015, the giant trade fair. Archaeologist Salvatore Settis objected wrathfully that this was not appropriate because, first, visitors can go to the museum in Reggio to see them; secondly, because they are “too fragile” to travel; and, finally, because if they are on loan to Milan for the trade fair there, they will then be allowed to go on tour all over the world, to the detriment of both Reggio and the ancient bronze warriors. So far culture minister Dario Franceschini is weighing the arguments on both sides.

The Italian culture scene will also be enlivened by the less well known but no less fascinating, entirely renovated Orto Botanico of Padua. The world’s oldest botanical garden, it dates from 1545 and was created to grow medicinal plants; given its academic matrix, it is still maintained by the University of Padua. As of Sept. 15 its doors will open showing, along with the ancient Orto dei Semplici, the brand new Biodiversity Garden, composed of five pavilions, from jungle to desert motifs, with the introduction of new space technologies. It is recognized by UNESCO as a world cultural heritage site.

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